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SUBJECT: SHATTERED OPPOSITION SHORT ON STRATEGY

REF: CARACAS 03291

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Venezuela's Coordinadora Democratica, the amalgamation of opponents to President Hugo Chavez that had begun to disintegrate before the regional elections on October 31, has been deemed dead by opposition parties and Chavez supporters alike. Many opposition members, who tend to blame the government for cheating and fault Washington for abandoning them, have been too preoccupied with their bad fortune to plan a rebound from the drubbing they had expected in the regionals. Some Chavez opponents predict an undemocratic end to his rule; others believe internal fissures already have his government on the brink of collapse. While opposition party members muse about new interparty alliances, policies, and strategies, the opposition is not making a serious effort to cooperate and may encounter more setbacks before being able to mount a serious challenge. In the meantime, the administration will have to answer for more now that it controls most of the government authorities. End summary.

Disunity and Disarray

2. (C) The union of Venezuelan political parties and interest groups opposing President Hugo Chavez, which had begun to unhinge before the regional elections on October 31, has disintegrated. On November 2, Accion Democratica (AD) president Henry Ramos Allup publicly declared the opposition's Coordinadora Democratica (CD) "finished." Social Christian Party (COPEI) deputy secretary general Cesar Perez Vivas confirmed to poloff the following day that the CD had outlived its usefulness. Primero Justicia (PJ) had broken with the CD in late September because, according to a PJ official in Tachira State, the PJ's involvement merely had bolstered rival opposition parties on the verge of folding. Smaller parties such as Causa R and Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP) also had walked in late September over their refusal to participate in elections viewed as rigged, according to press.

3. (C) Chavez opponents expected the President's candidates would dominate on October 31, but few were considering any strategy to rebound from the losses. Indeed, parties were still divided over short-term tactics. For example, no consensus existed within parties over whether their candidates should remain in regional elections, although most of the opposition ended up supporting participation. In some cases, such disagreements led to internal party fractures; Proyecto Venezuela leader Henrique Salas Roemer dismissed Luis Carlos Rubio for dropping out of the Anzoategui gubernatorial race, according to a member of the CD's political committee.

Pouters

4. (C) The most common trait among opposition supporters is an inability to look past recent setbacks. Chavez's opponents focused on rehashing examples of alleged governmental election fraud, the trumped-up criminal charges brought against fellow Chavez opponents, and other abuses to discussing ways to exploit Chavez's political miscalculations. Alfredo Coronil, AD's national secretary of international affairs, told poloff nearly 90 percent of the country opposed communism, but when asked why the opposition did not try to turn public opinion against oil loans to Cuba, Coronil merely resumed bashing Chavez's foreign policy. Coronil said Venezuela's former enthusiasm for democracy had dissipated into unprecedented apathy.

5. (C) Some dispirited Chavez opponents expect the United States to rescue Venezuela. Most Chavez opponents resent the Carter Center's endorsement of the referendum

process, and many convey distrust of the Embassy's appeals for better bilateral relations. National Assembly deputy

Alfonso Marquina (AD) questioned poloff October 18 whether the United States really cared about civil rights in Venezuela. On October 5, the alarmist political analyst Isabel Bacalao, who heads the think tank "Servicios de Informacion Estrategica," lamented to poloff that the US had lost its ability and willingness to influence Venezuela.

Chicken Littles

¶6. (C) Another view among opposition members is that Chavez is here to stay until he is overthrown. Of these skeptics, many privately justify rebellion by citing article 350 of the constitution, which provides for the public disavowal of antidemocratic or abusive leaders. Some expect imminent violence, such as retired Vice Admiral Rafael Huizi, who told poloff in early October that unidentified military officers would stage a coup if the administration ignored the release of the CD's election fraud report (REFTEL) on October 12.

Pollyannas

¶7. (C) A final opposition school of thought is that Chavismo is soon to collapse on its own. Bacalao sees hints of desperation in pro-government media broadcasts and Chavez speeches that point to the administration's lack of control over the military. Those opposition figures who dismiss Chavez's influence also tend to be confident of his opponents' cohesion. Chain emails announcing imminent, overwhelming street demonstrations circulate with such frequency that the radical pro-Chavez website www.aporrea.com prints them in derision.

Tacticians

¶8. (U) A few politicians have considered the future of the opposition. AD international affairs secretary Coronil said he envisioned a coalition of social democratic parties, to include AD, COPEI, Movement toward Socialism (MAS), and ABP. His homologue in COPEI, Sadio Garavini, told poloff November 5 the same, although he consigned AD to another imaginary alliance because it was too left-leaning. Causa R leader Andres Velazquez told poloff before the regionals he was considering a new leftist opposition bloc, and press reports on November 2 said ABP leader Antonio Ledezma had proposed a new opposition front, as well. PJ and Causa R announced November 15 they would unite in a 8-member National Assembly bloc that they hoped would grow into a political alliance, according to press.

¶9. (C) Even fewer opposition figures have articulated a shift in platform. Marquina, who is AD's floor leader in the National Assembly, told poloff before the regionals that most voters were interested in employment, not civil rights issues. Reflecting on the "it's the economy, stupid" slogan, Marquina said the most important issues in Venezuela involved the people's empty stomachs. PJ representatives in Anzoategui on October 26 also told poloff that the people were most interested in poverty alleviation. An assistant to MVR National Assembly deputy Luis Tascon in early October privately credited PJ for engaging with lower-class neighborhoods.

¶10. (C) Primero Justicia, whose officials in Tachira and Anzoategui told poloffs they were more concerned about the 2005 National Assembly elections, is perhaps the only party to have formulated a post-regional election strategy. PJ backers said they wanted to show effective management and service provision in a few key mayoralities, from which they would radiate outward. Anzoategui PJ backers won a local race with the campaign slogan "just like in Baruta and Chacao," which refers to two relatively clean, safe, upper-class Caracas municipalities run by PJ mayors. A Tachira PJ representative said PJ would concentrate on educating party members before the National Assembly elections next summer.

Comment

¶11. (C) No serious interparty dialog about opposition unity is occurring yet. Most opposition members are too focused on feeling sorry for themselves to plan for the future. Because government coffers almost exclusively finance political campaigns in Venezuela, we may even see more splits as some

opposition members approach the government seeking to cut deals to recoup financial losses. PJ may be the only party making a promising effort to distance itself--both by choosing its allies and by managing its image--from the pre-Chavez past, but the young professionals failed to generate much support from Venezuelans at the national level. Despite the Pollyannas' hopes, Chavez's government is highly unlikely to implode anytime soon. Nonetheless, the electorate now will have mostly Chavistas to blame for underemployment, public insecurity, and scarce government services. Chavismo may begin to face a bigger threat from within as pro-government officials compete for spoils in the regions.

¶12. (C) The splintering of the opposition reflects the fact that the opposition was a coalition of disparate groups united only by the prospect of defeating Chavez. As a coalition, the opposition groups excelled in organizing the signature collection drive (thanks to Sumate) but were less adroit in responding to Chavez and in offering a credible alternative to Chavez.

¶13. (C) The challenge to opposition groups remains that of presenting a credible alternative to Chavez and the MVR in the 2005 National Assembly elections and the 2006 presidential elections. New leaders need to emerge, and parties need to get in touch with their supporters, before there can be progress towards opposition unity.
Brownfield

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